

NSAA commits to flexibility as cross country season begins

Over the past two weeks, the NCAA has cancelled all fall national championships at the D1, D2 and D3 levels, and the great majority of collegiate conferences have cancelled all fall sport competitions.

In Nebraska, the Omaha Public Schools announced on August 7 that it was suspending sports activities for its seven high schools until at least October 19. That same week, Millard Public Schools announced that the sports seasons for its three high schools would be suspended if learning was moved to a remote-only format. With those two announcements, it seemed plausible that the number of high schools competing in Class A fall sports could drop from 32 to 22 – and a number of observers speculated that the Nebraska Schools Activities Association (NSAA) would soon follow the Big 10's lead by cancelling the falls sports season for all Classes.

Fortunately, Nebraska high schools began practicing for fall sports as scheduled on Monday, August 10. Since then, NSAA representatives have repeatedly emphasized that they are committed to doing as much as they can to keep the fall sports season alive.

Over the past week, I've had the opportunity to listen to NSAA Assistant Director Jon Dolliver speak with Class A cross country coaches on a Zoom call and to speak with him about several eligibility questions. Mr. Dolliver's observations on the fall cross country season are reassuring, and are summarized in this article. First, a bit of context.

In addition to NSAA Director Jay Bellar, Mr. Dolliver has played a key role in addressing COVID issues related to NSAA competition. Most notably, this past March Mr. Dolliver served as the tournament director for the boys' high school basketball State tournament. It was a unique tournament in many respects: only immediate family members were allowed to attend, it was one of just four State tournaments still being played even after the NCAA suspended all competition, and game highlights found their way to ESPN's Sports Center. It was also a success, with six champions crowned and no evidence that COVID infections were spread during three days of competition.

The NSAA leadership firmly believes that it made the right decisions in March based on the conditions specific to Nebraska. The NSAA planned to approach the spring sports season in the same manner, but that strategy became moot when Governor Ricketts effectively cancelled all athletic competitions with a Directed Health Measure issued on April 1.

Governor Ricketts amended his orders in late May, and athletic competition resumed this summer in youth and high school baseball, softball, basketball and volleyball. While the NSAA has no purview over those out-of-school organizations, the NSAA staff were closely watching to see whether these events could be held while minimizing the spread of COVID. The NSAA also authorized high school off-season conditioning activities to resume on June 1, and it worked closely with member schools to develop infection-control protocols to minimize risk. While infection rates have increased in Nebraska – and particularly in a few larger communities – there is little evidence that infections were resulting from youth or high school sporting activities.

With those experiences in mind, on the August 11th Zoom call Mr. Dolliver provided the Class A coaches with an overview of the NSAA's approach to fall sports, and specifically to cross country:

- In its most recent meeting, the NSAA BOD unanimously approved the start of the fall sports season. The NSAA's goal is to give students as many opportunities as possible based on current conditions.
- The NSAA will make its decisions based on specific circumstances in Nebraska. While a few other state associations in the Midwest have indicated that the recent BIG10 decision could have an impact on their fall sports decisions, the NSAA is firm that the BIG10 cancellation will have no bearing on its decision making.
- The NSAA is prepared to make decisions quickly if conditions change, and it expects there will be bumps in the road. Mr. Dolliver expects that at least some schools or specific sports teams will be placed under quarantine during the season.
- The NSAA's primary goal this fall is to hold state competitions, and it understands that changes may be required to reach that goal. For example, the NSAA will work closely with the city of Kearney and the Buffalo County Health Department to provide safe conditions for a State cross country meet. If modifications are required to achieve this, the NSAA is open to those changes. As Mr. Dolliver noted, "everything is on the table to ensure the state meet can happen."
- Decisions may need to be made on a sport-specific or class-specific basis. For example, if repeated outbreaks are occurring from football games, this wouldn't necessarily impact decisions regarding cross country, golf or tennis. Similarly, increasing infection rates in Omaha and Lincoln might impact decisions about Class A competition, but the other Classes may not see changes. Mr. Dolliver noted that Class A poses particular challenges because of the higher infection rates in metro areas and the sheer size of the high schools, but the NSAA is working closely with Class A schools to monitor these conditions.
- The governor, school superintendents and county health departments will have a major influence on how the fall sports season evolves. The NSAA staff expect to know a lot more about COVID issues after Labor Day, since practices will have been in place for three weeks and many schools will have had in-person classes for two weeks.
- In terms of Class A cross country, a few coaches have suggested eliminating the District meet since it is only eight days before the State meet. Until last week, all Class A schools were scheduled to compete at a single-site District meet, but the NSAA has reverted to the 2019 District rules (two sites) because of COVID concerns. Mr. Dolliver said that if a large number of Class A schools are unable to field teams for Districts, the NSAA would consider eliminating the District meet.
- The NSAA does not have a policy on remote learning. If a school district elects to move to 100% remote learning but continue competing in sports, the NSAA will allow it. Conversely, if a school district such as OPS moves to remote learning and suspends sports activities, the NSAA will observe that district's rule.

- Unlike football, the NSAA does not control scheduling or protocols for regular season cross country meets. A group of Omaha-area Class A coaches have elected to create COVID-specific race protocols and revamp meet schedules to reduce COVID-related risks, and the NSAA supports those proactive measures. It will be up to each meet host to determine whether spectators are limited. (In the next week, we'll publish an article summarizing those protocols.)
- The NSAA has shared recommended safety accommodations in light of COVID for each sport developed by its national federation. For cross country, among many suggestions, wave starts are included as possible accommodations. However, neither the NSAA nor the coaches on the Zoom call felt this was a good option for most races.

Since the OPS suspension of fall sports, the NSAA has fielded many questions regarding the eligibility status of athletes who wish to compete while their high school teams are suspended. For example, could an OPS athlete compete for her club volleyball team until October 19, and then re-join her high school volleyball team for District competition later that month? The NSAA response is a clear 'no'; any 'outside participation' by a high school athlete would prevent them from being eligible for NSAA competition this season.

In terms of cross country, OPS could resume fall sports as soon as October 19, which is four days before the State cross country meet. If the Class A District meets scheduled for October 15 were eliminated or postponed – a far-fetched idea, we acknowledge – then OPS athletes might be able to compete at a later Districts or at State.

A scenario more likely to happen would be when a school district suspends in-person learning, sports practices and sports competitions for 14-21 days to stop the spread of infection – but then resumes those activities prior to Districts. The NSAA expects that these types of temporary suspensions will happen – for example, the Broken Bow Public Schools suspended in-person school for several grades and all extracurricular activities on August 14 due to several positive tests among its teaching staff.

Since the OPS announcement, several cross country athletes have told me they are interested in competing in road races or as an unattached athlete in high school meets. At my request, Mr. Dolliver specifically addressed how eligibility for cross country athletes would be impacted in these 'outside participation' events:

- If a high school runner competes in a road race between August 10 and the State meet, they would be ineligible to compete in Districts or State.
- The NSAA schools that host cross country meets cannot allow unattached runners from schools who have suspended sports activities. NSAA schools may only compete against active teams of NSAA members schools and member schools of other state associations.

With those answers in hand, runners with suspended seasons have two options: (a) avoid racing and hope that their high school teams will resume competition prior to Districts, or (b) participate in road

races and non-sanctioned cross country races. In a perfect world they wouldn't have to make this choice, but COVID has guaranteed that perfection will be an elusive goal in 2020.

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